

A CLASSROOM BASED RESEARCH PROJECT INCORPORATING ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES (ESP) METHODOLOGY PREPARING JAPANESE STUDENTS FOR HOMESTAY IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

English for Special Purposes (ESP) lesson materials were created for Japanese high school students going on homestay to Cairns, Australia. The lessons were designed specifically for situations that the students would encounter with their homestay families and at the school they would attend regularly during their stay. After teaching the lessons, and after the subsequent homestay, students were interviewed and asked about the effectiveness of the materials. Most said that they enjoyed the way the materials had been taught and had found them useful while they had been abroad. There was an increase in motivation and a general improvement in the attitude towards English study after the project was complete.

1. Introduction

The aim of this project was to provide learning materials consisting of specific language skills related to a short-term trip to Australia for a group of Japanese high school students. In having the excellent opportunity to use relevant English language skills while travelling, it was hoped that the students would be able to utilize functional language for effective communication as the need arose.

This report begins with a literature review concerning students' needs, goes on to discuss and define ESP, and then considers the current state of affairs in the Japanese education system. Following this is a classroom based primary research project based on the educational homestay programme, a breakdown and analysis of the results relating to the project, and then finally a conclusion relating to what the project achieved.

Limited as it is on a broader scale of educational research, this project's main objective is to provide some insight into how well a group of learners can use specifically taught language skills in a natural setting and to observe whether new language items could be significantly retained. It is also intended to see whether this kind of project can improve the students' attitude towards learning English.

2. Review of the Literature

In deciding what to teach, and in choosing what materials best facilitate the learning process, one has to take into consideration how second language learners learn best. Hall (2003) states :

Before planning or writing materials for language teaching, there is one crucial

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question we need to ask ourselves. The question is this: *How do we think people learn language ?*

(2003 : 229)

In answering this question Hall states that nobody knows exactly how languages are learned (2003 : 229). However, it is known that the learning process is gradual and that conscious learning and acquisition play a major role in the process, as does motivation and self-efficacy. The pedagogic choices teachers make are also highly important—the relevance of what is taught can inspire or demotivate accordingly.

Clearer ideas about how language is successfully learnt may also help us develop more appropriate materials. It should also be vital to establish what exactly constitute learners' needs in individual teaching environments. Dudley-Evans & St. John (1998) state that “need is defined by the reasons for which the student is learning English” (1998 : 3). They go on to say that “these (needs) are the starting points which determine the language to be taught” (1998 : 3). To what extent the teaching of specific language skills, rather than general language skills, is significant is thus far unclear. The teaching of grammar would seem a strong departure point in the early stages of learning, while encouraging usage at an early stage would also seem worthwhile. However, whether these early developments in language skill are retained over a long period seems unlikely unless there is some motivation for continued study ; maybe the student will find cultural interests or make connections with native speakers of the language, but the likelihood of this is diminished if there is little impact from what is originally learnt.

As mentioned above, the teaching of grammar rules in the classroom may provide a solid grounding and may be of particular importance when considering the need for prototypical language from which to build knowledge of the second language. However, as Flores (1995), referring to the development of good linguistic habits comments, “the goal of language instruction is the development of the learner’s ability to use language as a tool for conveying meaning rather than as a means to demonstrate correct sentence forms or observance of grammar rules” (1995 : 58). Therefore, if usage leads to positive learning of the second language, one must take advantage of opportunities to use what is learned in real-life communication whenever possible.

Shortall’s (1996) supposition suggests that there are certain “unreliable lists of structures” (1996 : 41) imposed on teachers, and this informs us that we may be some way away from providing good enough input in our classrooms. Depending on the restrictions of a regulation syllabus, we may therefore endeavour to, whenever possible, provide alternative materials when opportunities occur. If these possibilities occur in the development of the learners, it could be a vital aspect of their success in second language acquisition.

2.1 ESP in language teaching

Thus far a comprehensive definition of ESP is yet to be established. Robinson (1991) suggests that it is “impossible to produce a universally applicable definition of ESP” (1991 : 1). Robinson also remarks that Strevens (1980) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987) agree that defining ESP could be potentially very complicated. However, what is apparent is that ESP is “normally goal directed” (Robinson 1991 : 2). Moreover, ESP courses are created not so much that students solely require English for general purposes (EGP) but who, in fact, need English skills in one specific area of work or study (1991 : 2). Therefore, it would be common sense to signify that ESP courses are based on a needs analysis and that courses are designed “to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that the students have to do through the medium of English” (1991 : 3).

2.2 Pedagogic Needs

According to Robinson (1991), needs and learning objectives are closely connected in the sense that they can “...refer to students’ study...requirements, that is, what they have to be able to do at the end of their language course” (1991 : 7). Nunan (1999) states that a ‘needs analysis’ in certain scenarios is “irrelevant...because learners have no immediate communicative ends in view” (1999 : 155)—the lack of an end ‘communicative goal’ is often apparent at high school level in Japan.

2.3 Materials development

Sheldon (1988) refers to the ‘inadequacies’ that exist in materials writing. Allwright (1981) concurs :

Language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials.

Allwright also states that we should not expect too much from materials and that the role of teaching materials is “necessarily limited” (1981 : 8). Robinson (1991) points out there is a degree of support for materials—“other writers on the issue are in no doubt that teaching materials are essential”—but admits that there is an opinion shared by many that much of what is used in second language learning is deficient (1991 : 57).

Tomlinson (1998 : 7-22) proposes a set of criteria from which materials might be developed. He emphasizes strongly that the materials should motivate, interest, and instil confidence in the learners. There is also an emphasis on “self-discovery” where the materials “should require and facilitate learner self-investment” (1998 : 11). Tomlinson also supports the presence of ‘authentic input’ in learning materials (1998 : 13). Furthermore, Tomlinson stresses that there should be ample opportunity for students to practice the target language purposefully in order to develop good communicative skills (1998 : 14).

3. Background teaching situation

3.1 Second language learning in Japan

Considering how Japanese learners develop second language skills, certain issues need to be considered. Firstly, one thing that should be noted is that in Japanese learning contexts the teacher is usually considered as the giver of knowledge and students are passive to the learning process. Teacher-fronted instruction is commonplace and it is accepted that students are not required to participate as readily as one might expect. It can be frustrating for teachers, as it is often unsuitable to push communicative language teaching techniques in classes where students are not obliged to ‘speak up’ in front of the class (Nunan 1999 : 156).

3.2 Presentation, Practice, Production model in Japanese textbooks

Materials commonly used in Japanese high schools are often structured using the Presentation, Practice, and Production model. The use of PPP techniques are often criticized, for example Lewis (quoted in Willis and Willis 1996) asserts that “...any paradigm based on, or remotely resembling...(PPP) is wholly unsatisfactory...and is (indeed) nonsense” (2000 : 11). The behaviourist view of teaching suggests that there is, at the very least, something that can be achieved from this type of instruction. Learners exposed to PPP and “close teacher control” (Willis 2000 : 9) will at least learn the ability to produce language forms, if not actually going on to be able to develop the ability to “use the language in real time” (2000 : 9). Though the above criticism of PPP is somewhat justifiable, at high school level in Japan there may be some uses for it as lessons are often rigid and structured, do not required much output, and thus may be used as a departure point for developing confidence in using the basics.

The set classroom textbooks used by the students in this study are *On Air Communication* (Yashiro : 1998a/b). The lessons are PPP in structure and are arranged to incorporate reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks. This book is generally taught one task after another without much room for discussion of language items ; the Japanese curriculum’s main objective is to prepare students for university entrance examinations and there is often little need for doing anything other than the task in hand. In my experience, the book serves its purpose, but rarely inspires much else.

3.3 Japanese learner considerations

Authentic English communicative opportunities are limited for Japanese learners of English and formal instruction can be often uninspiring and staid. The need for an enhancement of communication skills is well documented. As Willis points out, Japanese students often leave school with “little in the way of usable competence” (2000 : 10), and this has usually come about by a lack of practical and authentic usage and practice.

Moreover, basic mistakes in grammar and pronunciation are common. The source of this problem could be attributed to various factors, including the quality of input from Japanese

teachers of English. LoCastro surmises :

Japanese English Language teaching (ELT) has a negative reputation for producing less than competent speakers of foreign languages.

(LoCastro, 1996 : 40)

LoCastro also states that though there has been a shift in interest to a more communicative approach in English lessons in Japan, methods such as grammar-translation are still popular and therefore there is less of a need for Japanese teachers of English to be proficient speakers of English (1996 : 49).

The participants of this study, though still in an early stage of second language development, already show signs of making the same linguistic errors. They tend to make mistakes when communicating, for example, misuse/dropping of articles, problems with verb conjugation, and incorrect sentence structuring. To what extent this can be rectified or managed is arguable. However, framing correct language structures and features within meaningful situations may have the potential of not only encouraging correct usage of forms but could indeed motivate the students into further investigations into appropriate language use.

4. Method

4.1 Learning objectives

1. To prepare students for events that will happen during their homestay
2. To familiarize the students with potential learning experiences
3. To encourage authentic communication
4. To heighten student awareness of potential cultural behaviours and experiences
5. Build confidence in the use of simple phrases and new vocabulary
6. Encourage students to explore language that may be appropriate to them
7. To alleviate negative attitudes towards English
8. To increase student dependence on their peers when problems with language use arise
9. To familiarize students with degrees of politeness and cultural nuances
10. To motivate students in using the lessons as a reference point

Four 50 minute lessons were taught over a period of two weeks. The four lessons were written to replicate individual home-stay experiences and were categorized into four headings : Family Connections, School Connections, Shopping and Sightseeing, and Saying “Goodbye” and “Thank you”. The lessons were PPP in structure, which replicated the classroom texts already in use by the students. Interviews were conducted prior to the development of the materials and students were asked several questions related to their knowledge of Australia as well as being tested on their English communication skills and second language grammatical competence. Daily report sheets were provided so the students could keep records of their language use. This data

collection was essential for the purpose of analysis upon the students' return. Despite data recorded by the students being collected, it was also imperative to see how much language had been retained and could be recalled for use. To establish this, oral communication tests relating to each lesson were conducted.

4.2 Analysis of the lessons

In the development of the materials an attempt was made to provide a certain amount of opportunity for language use. No grammar was taught directly, but instead awareness was raised during communicative tasks informing the students of appropriate forms and usage. Experimenting with the idea of embedding the grammar within each stage of the lesson, I hoped to further emphasize the point, in agreement with (Willis 2003 : 23), that language or specific grammar items should not be taught in isolation but instead as part of an overall structure.

A considerable amount of time was spent analysing learner factors. The consideration of the students' ages, interests, level of proficiency in English, perceived aptitude, academic and educational level, perceived attitudes to learning, motivation, learning goals, learning styles, and personality was important to the development of practical and usable content. Considerations had to be made as to what would specifically help the students during their homestay. As the lessons were intended to act as merely a framework from where the students could develop skills, and as no grammar was explicitly taught, each language item was taught as single words or phrases with each meaning explained, translated, or clarified during lessons. Each lesson consisted of 'the subject matter being the carrier of the language content (Allwright, 1981 : 8), the intention being to familiarize the students with language that they could utilize functionally if and when the opportunity arose.

As the students were 'short-term visitors', the selection of the topics of the units were very specific. From the list referred to in Nunan (1991) two categories suited the specific needs of the students while on homestay. These were 'first contact' and 'sightseeing'. Two other categories suited to the programme were created: 'in-class English' (for daily use in class) and 'saying goodbye' (for use with homestay families). It was hoped that these four categories would not overload the students, but would instead provide a good grounding for immediate usage.

5. Results

A total of 12 students attended the classes and participated in the subsequent homestay programme. There were 10 female and 2 male students. Most of the students participated well in the lessons and showed good motivation to learn. There were two exceptions in the group who did not participate as well as the others.

Each daily feedback report included a questionnaire to help ascertain whether new language items had been at all useful. The table below shows to what degree individuals found the exercises

useful :

Lesson	Very useful	Quite useful	Useful once	Not at all useful
Family connections	3	5	1	3 (2)*
School connections	4	4	2	2 (1)*
Sightseeing and Shopping	3	5	2	2 (1)*
Saying Goodbye	3	4	2	3 (2)*

* (no.) returned incomplete

These results indicate that the majority of the participants found the lessons significantly useful. However, it was necessary to question individuals as to *what* they found useful and to find out if they would be able to use specific language items more effectively after completing the course.

Additional feedback was also collected from individuals in forty minute interviews. Information on usage was gathered. Concerning the individual lessons, there was relatively strong feedback. Relating to the idea of language retention in the introduction of this report, the main aim of the interview was to establish how accurately and confidently the students were able to continue using the language that had been taught.

Several students kept close records of their language use, used the lessons' translations as reference, and displayed good language use during the follow-up oral communication test. The main feedback was that the lessons worked particularly well as a reference point, which suggests that point number ten in the learning objectives section of this paper (LO10) was realised well. The students were also able to use the materials as an immediate tool for discovering correct and useful language forms.

6. Realisation of learning objectives

It was anticipated that the lessons would help increase confidence in communicating in English, encourage communication between peers, and develop teamwork, linguistic analysis and intrinsic motivation.

Feedback suggested that the lessons helped the students. The lessons worked as a reference point in certain situations or helped prepare students for situations that could occur (LO1). The feedback provided information regarding usage in varied situations. Most students found that the

lessons had been helpful. In terms of familiarizing students with potential learning experiences (LO2), it was interesting to find that the students did not deviate much from the language they had been instructed to use through the lessons. However, this leads on to the question of whether or not lessons helped encourage authentic communication (LO3). The fact that the students were regularly involved in authentic language exchanges suggests that real communication was established and the taught language was experimented with.

While interviewing the students, questions were asked about whether they had enjoyed the cultural experience of using English in a real environment. Most of the students expressed that they had had a good experience. They had not thought of their time abroad as particularly 'educational'. With the English usage being framed positively the students were asked if they had enjoyed communicating. The feedback suggested that the use of new vocabulary and phrases was enjoyable and considerably more enjoyable than when they had studied English formally in class. This confirms (LO5) and (LO7) as being in some way successful. Asked whether they had an improved attitude towards English study the students generally agreed that they felt more motivated to study as they had found using English correctly to be inspiring.

Three objectives were particularly salient : (LO6), (LO8), and (LO9). A theme of lesson 1 was to talk about hobbies and likes and dislikes. This was content that they had studied many times before and was a good way to build confidence using English. As the students appeared to work well in their groups, it would suggest that (LO8) was a successful learning objective too. The students also understood that they needed to use correct forms, using polite language when talking to their home-stay families (LO9). As pointed out in (LO10) there was good use of the lessons as reference and immediate use of words and phrases.

7. Strengths and weaknesses of the materials

The process of writing materials proved to be quite challenging. One significant challenge was to find a balance between writing tasks that students would find structurally familiar but original enough to inspire interest. In a sense the structure of the tasks did not differ from what the students were familiar with. However, feedback suggested that they enjoyed the focused, purposeful instruction as well as the less formal way they were used to studying, which is usually in a more rigid and uncommunicative environment (The students particularly favoured the pair and group work). The layout of the materials was a weak point. The worksheets in particular were cluttered, information was bulked together, and I feel the tasks were not as communicative as they could have been, restricting opportunities for use when practicing.

8. Conclusion

The importance of analyzing the complexities of language learning is fundamental to the development of a professional teacher. Through better understanding of what works at classroom level—the development of learning materials ; the analysis of student needs etc. —teachers

will become more aware of pedagogic decisions they can make to improve the learning experience. During this study, I have found that through developing lesson materials that encourage use, which students go on to use in real-life language environments, the learning experience can be enhanced. Therefore, I believe teachers should try to take advantage of opportunities to provide authentic experiences of language, giving opportunities for real usage whenever possible.

Students need to be exposed to lessons that are structured and systematic but provide them with a good opportunity to use the language. Also, if learners of English can be encouraged to identify with the language, connect with the cultural aspects of the language, compare the language to their own and see how communicatively language is used then focus, motivation and goal setting may increase.

The materials designed for this project may not have been effective enough to result in any long-term positive language outcomes. There are it seems, however, some positive ends that have been accomplished, especially regarding the students' attitudes towards English, which can lead to increased motivation and commitment to language study in the long term.

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